

**Washington, DC** - Thirty-six Members of Congress called Monday for a meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) to discuss the recent massive arms delivery by Russia to the Chavez government of Venezuela. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will raise concerns over the massive \$120 million Venezuelan arms deal when she addresses the House Republican Conference on Wednesday.

Last week, Venezuelan Defense Minister Garcia announced the imminent arrival of 100,000 AK-103 Russian assault rifles. Venezuela's armed forces total only 87,500 in all of its four branches – the Army, Navy (including Marines), Air Force and Armed Forces of Cooperation (FAC or commonly called the National Guard). Venezuela will also receive over 40 Russian military helicopters, including the Mi-26 – the largest military helicopter in the world. Venezuela also purchased licenses to manufacture even more AK-103 assault rifles in its government-owned factories. In sum, the arms deal with Russia is the largest purchase of arms by Venezuela since Chavez came to power in 1999.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-IL) drafted the letter because of growing concerns about President Chavez's plans for stability in Latin America and his growing connection to the Cuban government. "Most Latin American countries are at peace and nearly all are democracies. Who are the Venezuelans arming to fight?"

On April 20th, Secretary of State Rice said she "made it very clear to the Russian government of our concerns about certain arms sales in Latin America and [particularly] Venezuela." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rebuffed the U.S. request to suspend the massive arms delivery. Press reports also indicate that Venezuela may also attempt to buy advanced MiG-29 fighter aircraft.

In the letter [attached in English and Spanish] delivered Monday to OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza, 36 members urged the 35 nations of the OAS to assume its key role of protecting peace in the region. "Many nations in the Western Hemisphere have a growing sense of alarm with developments in Venezuela," said Kirk. "The OAS should give voice to those concerns and ask the Chavez government how this large Russian shipment of military aircraft and assault rifles will be used."

Contact: Matt Towson

847-940-0202  
cell: 773-454-5396